

The Way of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

We are designed for the unfolding of God's love. --Elizabeth O'Connor

In the reading from last week, Paul talked about the diversity of gifts and members of the community of Jesus, each one essential and none more important than the other. Then Paul left us on the threshold of something more. Strive for even more important gifts, he said. Now I will show you a even more excellent or surpassing way, or path. It is the way of love, the love that comes from God, the love that IS God. It is a love for which we are made to be channels and instruments. It can be our way of life. If we are working seriously with understanding and living this life of a diversity of gifts in community, it prepares us to go into the next, all-important dimension of the life of Jesus' community and its members -- the life of love.

Love. In the Greek language, *agape*. It is the kind of affection for and action toward others and the world that expresses God's own love for us and the world. This is the superior gift Paul now wants to talk about. It is to characterize every life and every community (church) that calls itself by the name of Jesus. It is a gift in that it comes from God, something we could not achieve completely by our own efforts. It can only be received, yet cannot be held onto as something for ourselves alone. It comes to us as a gift, yet we need to strive toward it, make an effort to embody it in our lives. This love has to do with our true nature. As Elizabeth O'Connor wrote, we are created for the unfolding of God's love in and through us. In this, our lives are fulfilled.

Paul never directly defines this love he is talking about. He never says, "Love is a feeling of affection for everyone and everything," or something like that. In fact, the love he is talking about does not seem to be about feelings or affections at all. That is how our culture defines love. I just LOVE chocolate ice cream! I just LOVE my new car! Love as feelings or affections is a flighty sort of love. Our emotions come and go, rise and fall. We "fall into" and "fall out of" love with others. We "love" someone until he or she does or says something we don't like, that doesn't fit the way we want that person to be. Then we "fall out of" love. It is sad, really. So many people go from relationship to relationship--whether friendship or romantic--never getting it, never going deeper into what love really is and can be about. But you can't make someone do this. We have to WANT to discern, strive for, and grow in this love that is more real. It doesn't just "happen". I think that is why Paul says strive for this greater gift.

First, Paul says that love is that without which nothing we do or accomplish amounts to a hill of beans. Speaking in tongues, for instance, was a chief cause of strife in the Corinthian community. It was ecstatic speech, thought to be directly from God. Those who could do it were very proud of themselves. They were REALLY spiritual! Nonsense, says Paul. No gift or ability that we have, no matter how wonderfully we do it, means anything if we do not have love. Ecstatic tongues and emotion-filled worship are nothing but a bunch of noise. Prophetic vision? Means nothing in and of itself, unless there is love behind it. Understanding of life's mysteries or having vast knowledge of this and that? Not enough, without love. The kind of faith that can perform powerful deeds? Pure show, without love. Actions of astounding generosity and self-sacrifice? They might impress others or yourself, but without love, they don't achieve anything that really matters.

These are very strong words! This extraordinarily eloquent passage from Paul's pen might not be read so often at weddings and such if we stopped and looked more deeply into it. Or better yet, if people getting married really heard these words and worked with them in their life together, it would help them through the years move from one idea of love to something more lasting and rewarding, something that does not happen quickly, but takes time and effort.

The very things that we tend to pride ourselves on, that we think are the sole purpose of the church, or in other ways make all important, in Paul's view are completely worthless unless we are moving toward and growing in this thing called *agape*. If our community gets caught in making Christian faith and life into emotionalism or sentimentalism, we have missed the whole point. If we cultivate great wisdom and understanding of the spiritual life, or the scriptures, or the spiritual tradition in which we stand, or if we accumulate great knowledge about religion or politics or even our own church's history and such, it means nothing if we are not LIVING the love of God. If we reduce faith into some kind of tool to accomplish great

deeds, and develop highly sacrificial lifestyles, it means nothing if we are not on the way of love, if we are not embodying to a fuller degree the very love that comes from God to be lived through us.

Paul never directly defines love, but he shows us ways to experience and grow in love. Paul says a little about how love ACTS, how love BEHAVES, you might say. And how it does NOT act or behave. Love is patient, or willing to endure over the long haul. Love is kind, a kindness that meets each person with an honoring of that person's being. We are kind to one another not because we are nice people and deserve it! We are kind to one another and all others because we all belong to God.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on getting its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. Love does not share the joy of someone who succeeds in a harmful, dishonest, or immoral action. There is no joy in "Mission Accomplished" when the mission was wrong. Paul is talking about what love is NOT, what love does NOT do. Then he goes back to what love DOES. It rejoices in truth, the deepest, widest truth of life and what life is about. Even when that truth is not comfortable, when it challenges us, this is part of what love is and does.

Love bears all things. Literally, the word used here means "roof" (*stegēi*), and it is not exactly clear what Paul means by using it. Something like love providing a shelter, a roof. Love, we might say, is able to withstand things that are harmful and destructive, the way a roof shelters us from the rain or snow. Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. One commentary on this portion says this: "When Love has no evidence, it believes the best. When the evidence is adverse, it hopes for the best. And when hopes are repeatedly disappointed, it still courageously waits." [I Corinthians: International Critical Commentary] This made me think that we as Jesus' community have a kind of naïveté that persists in seeing the best in each person or situation, and keeps open to a better outcome than one can see from the present state of things. It is not a rose-colored glasses kind of blindness to reality, but a view of persons and life that sees at the heart of everything the essential and potential goodness with which God created everything and everyone.

Here is a very helpful way of practicing love. We look honestly at things in ourselves and about our actions that are not loving. We do not waste our time punishing ourselves for what we see, but look more deeply into these aspects of our lives to learn where they are coming from. Our impatience? What is it really telling us about ourselves? That we think we can control life around us and make things happen the way we want? That maybe we learned impatience from parents, teachers, or others who demanded certain performance of us as the price tag for acceptance and love? So we become demanding of others, continuing the cycle. Or we can simply start practicing kindness or patience in small ways so that we begin to know what love is. Or we practice a humility with regard to our own lives that grows in its understanding of our being part of a very expansive world and universe. What I am trying to say is that we discover what love is and grow more loving as we let go of what is NOT love and practice in very concrete ways what IS love. As we diminish our impatience or unkindness or arrogance, love begins to arise in us. We may still not be able to define this love Paul is talking about, but we will know its reality in our lives and our life together.

The final portion of the reading says that the nature of this love is that it is never ending. Paul repeats in a different way what he has said before. Just as he said that the various gifts mean nothing without love, now he says that all of those gifts come to an end, except for love. He also talks about the fact that our lives are always in process, always growing and maturing, moving from the partial toward the whole and full. This is the way we see life when we are living the way of love. We come to see our lives within that great mysterious process of life, from birth to death, through stages of growing and maturing. This itself, I think, is part of love, even the very expression of love. Through all the changes of our lives, all the growth and maturing, there is present within and at the core of life a love that leads us from the partial to the whole, from the hidden to the fully known. That love is of God, IS God.

Paul's words about children and childishness leave me cold, however. I don't take Paul as an authority on the nature of childhood or children. What we are, I hope, finally learning today is that children, especially young children, are NOT the way we have historically portrayed them -- self-centered little things that only really matter when they grow up! Those who work most closely with and pay attention to children know that Jesus is much closer to the truth about children -- they know what the kingdom of God is about; it already belongs to them; we are to become like little children if we are to be part of life the way God made it to be. Paul is trying to say that the way of love is a way that leads us from self-centeredness to interrelatedness, from narrowness of spirit to the broad spirit that makes room for others, from our tendency to try to reduce, control, and possess life and people to a greater and greater letting go so that we can be part of life.

This morning, on the back wall of the chapel hangs a painting by Dede Buhler, which she gave to the community last year. It has been in the parlor for several months. It just seemed that the painting belonged in that place in this room, especially because of its subject and title: Ever Present Love. That image of the divine or sacred is found in all major religious traditions -- a love that continually shines upon us and all the creation, the whole universe, without regard for our deserving or not deserving it. It is a constant gift (*grace--karis*). It is the source of life and the power that draws life forward, always toward life. It is the love that never ends, of which Paul speaks, and the love that enables us to be the persons God made us to be and the community which Jesus called together. It is a love that never gives up, that accepts and yet always calls us to the greater gift, the way of love itself.